

The apparent existence of ajnAna

In BrihadAraNyaka BhAshya Vartika 4.3.348 to 4.3.356, SureshwarAchArya explains about ajnAna. The shlokaS and their literal translations are as under: -

बुध्यादिष्वपि सूक्ष्मेषु यत्सूक्ष्मतममुच्यते। बुध्यादिकारणं नित्यमात्माविद्येति भण्यते॥ (348)

That which is stated as the subtlest among the subtle buddhi etc AND that which is the cause of buddhi etc - is spoken as AtmA-avidyA which is permanent.

अपि कूटस्थवपुषः प्रतीचः सङ्गकारकम्। तत्त्वमस्यादिवाक्योत्थज्ञानबाध्यं च यद्विदुः॥ (349)

That which causes association of even the innermost which is of the form of changelessness AND that which is known as sublatable by the knowledge arising from sentence “that thou art” - (that is AtmA-avidyA).

यन्निमित्तं च साक्षित्वं कारणत्वं तथाऽऽत्मानः। सर्वकार्यविनाशेऽपि यद्वीजमवशिष्यते॥ (350)

Similarly, that on account of which there is sAkshi-hood (witness-hood) and kAraNatva (causality) of Atman AND that which remains as the seed even after the destruction of all effects - (that is AtmA-avidyA).

तदात्मज्योतिषेद्वं सन्नित्यमेवावतिष्ठते। उत्पत्तिस्थितिभङ्गानां न वेद्मीति च साक्षितः॥ (351)

That (AtmA-avidyA) situates permanently as illuminated by Atma-jyoti during the creation, sustenance and dissolution. And from that sAkshI is “I do not know”. [As per Anandagiri SwAmI, creation, sustenance and dissolution appearing in verse 351 refer to the seed mentioned in verse 350. However, the translation here is literal.]

कूटस्थ एव साक्ष्यत्र स्वमोहाभासहेतुतः। अविचारितसंसिद्धितमोऽनुभवसंश्रयात्॥(352)

KUTastha alone is the sAkshI here on account of reflection in own delusion (avidyA). It (AtmA-avidyA) is established on account of non-contemplation and appears at darkness on account of anubhava.

निःसाक्षिके न वेद्मीति न कथंचित्प्रसिध्यति। तथा कूटस्थसंवित्के नितरां नैतदिष्यते॥(353)

“I do not know” is not possible without sAkshI. Similarly, “I do not know” can never be possible for samvit which is kUTastha.

ऐश्वर्यं कारणत्वं च साक्षित्वमपि चाऽत्मनः। सतेशितव्यकार्यार्थसाक्ष्यार्थेनास्य संगतेः॥ (354)

The opulence, causality and witness-hood of this Atman is reconciled only by taking the objects as lorded over, existent and being witnessed.

आत्माज्ञानमतः प्रत्यक्चैतन्याभासवत्सदा। आत्मनः कारणत्वादेः प्रयोजकमिहेष्यते॥(355)

Therefore, AtmA-ajnAna is always possessed of the reflection of innermost-Chaitanya.

And it (AtmA-ajnAna) is accepted here as the reasons for the causality etc of Atman.

चैतन्याभासावत्प्रत्यङ्गोहान्तात्प्रत्यगात्मनः। बुद्ध्यादेर्विषयान्तस्य सिद्धिः स्यात्साक्षिणस्ततः॥(356)

From that inner pratyagAtmA is established that innermost delusion which is possessed with the reflection of Chaitanya. Thereafter, from that sAkshI, all other objects such as buddhi etc are established.

Explanation:

AtmA-avidyA is stated as the subtlest among all subtle entities such as buddhi etc. This AtmA-avidyA is the cause of buddhi. It is sublated by the knowledge arising from the mahAvAkyAs and this alone causes the (as if) association in association-less changeless Atman.

When this AtmA-avidyA acts as the visheshaNa, Atman becomes the kAraNa of the universe. Whereas when this AtmA-avidyA acts as the upAdhi, Atman becomes the sAkshI of the universe including avidyA. AchArya says in BBV 1.4.372 that sAkshI is defined as avidyA-upahita-Brahman. अज्ञानमात्रोपाधित्वादविद्यामुषितात्मभिः। कौटस्थ्यान्निर्द्वयोऽप्यात्मा साक्षीत्य ध्यस्यते जडैः॥ (BBV 1.4.372)

Here the usage of word nityam (permanent) is only to indicate the causal nature of avidyA. Just as cause is permanent whereas effects keep on changing, similarly this avidyA is permanent vis-a-vis its effect. (Anandagiri TItA 4.3.348).

This avidyA is illuminated by the chaitanya. Technically, it is called sAbhAsa-ajnAna. That is, ajnAna with the reflection of Chaitanya therein. Though there is a difference between reflection and AbhAsa which distinguishes pratibimbavAda and AbhAsavAda, we can simply understand AbhAsa as being permeated everywhere in avidyA.

Now, sAkshI is avidyA-upahita-chaitanya whereas kAraNa-Brahman is avidyA-vishishTa-Brahman. avidyA, however, itself is accepted only from the frame of reference of avidyA. It is not accepted from the frame of reference of Brahman.

Thus, avidyA is the first to be known. Its knowledge is only by sAkshI.

Objection: Why can't avidyA be known by pramAtA or kUTastha? Why insistence on avidyA being only sAkshi-bhAsya?

Answer: pramA is always to remove avidyA. It is contradictory to avidyA. Hence, avidyA is not known by pramAtA. (Anandagiri 4.3.353)

If kUTastha is spoken as sAkshI of avidyA, then sAkshitva will become its swarUpa and it will always require a sAkshya. That is inadmissible. SiddhAnta accepts sAkshitva also as owing to ajnAna.

Hence, avidyA is only sAkshi-bhAsya.